

ALASKAN REINDEER herds are rounded up by Eskimo cowboys for seasonal packing operation which begins in August.

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Eskimos Pack Reindeer On Nunivak Island, Alaska

AT THE C Street Foodland market in Anchorage, Alaska, you can buy Alaskan reindeer pot roast at 49 cents a pound; reindeer round and sirloin steak at 65 cents; rib chops at 59 cents; or reindeer stew meat for only 39 cents. These are just about half the retail price for Choice beef in the

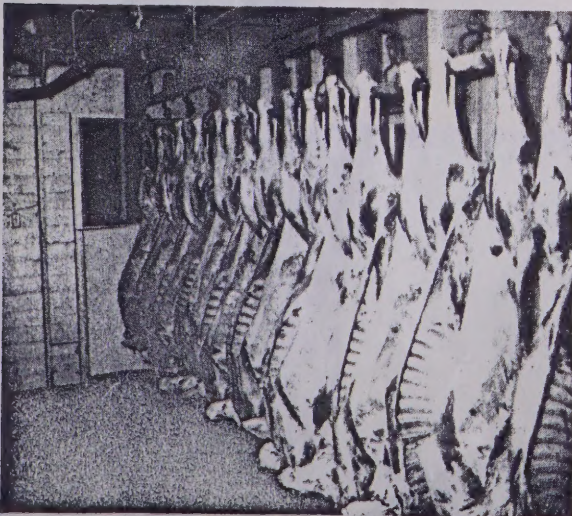
same city.

A California merchant is buying Alaskan reindeer liver as a specialty food. In Hawaii you can also buy reindeer meat if you know where to find it.

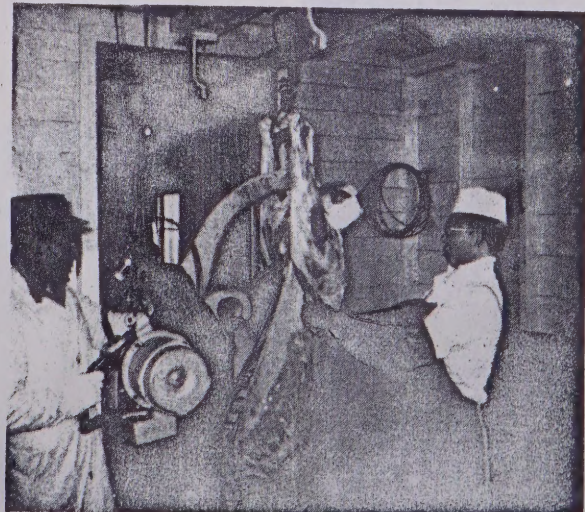
Much of it comes from a packing plant on the island of Nunivak, 40

miles off the Alaskan mainland about half way between the Aleutian islands and the Bering Strait. It is near 165° longitude which splits the Pacific ocean to the west of Hawaii.

The only plant of its kind in the United States; possibly in the



REINDEER ON THE RAIL, at Nunivak. Some of the meat is sold as reindeer-burger, but most is sold as frozen carcasses.



ESKIMO BUTCHERS split reindeer carcass with electric power saw at the Nunivak Island plant in Alaska.

entire world, it operates with a minimum of problems: the livestock supply grows wild, Eskimo cowboys round up the herds, there are no labor problem and no taxes.

Western Meat Industry asked Vern V. Hirsch, Area Land Operations Officer, U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Juneau, Alaska, for an exclusive report on this unique meat plant. This is what he told us:

LOCATION: MEKORYUK

Our only slaughter plant is located at the village of Mekoryuk on the Island of Nunivak, about 40 miles west of the mainland and at approximately 60° latitude and 166° longitude.

It is operated from August to about mid-October of each year for the purpose of controlling the reindeer numbers on the Island and providing income for the 45 native families that reside there. The slaughtering at other herds is done in the open with no slaughter or refrigeration facilities.

ESKIMO COWBOYS

Reindeer are provided with no concentrates. They graze the tundra vegetation which includes some grass, sedges, dwarf willow, lichens, moss, and berries. The cow-boyng is done by Eskimo herders on foot. The land surface can be classified as muskeg, or bog country, and unsuitable for travel by horse in the summer months. Twelve inches below the surface is perma-frost throughout much of the reindeer grazing area.

The reindeer bulls are fat enough to provide a nice carcass by the last part of August when our Nunivak Island killing season starts. Bulls cannot be used for human consumption much after the first week in September as the rutting season starts and the meat is strong. Steers and females are then slaughtered until sometime in October, depending on the weather conditions.

TRAP DOOR PEN

Our killing plant consists of a series of pockets or nearly round corrals, each one growing progressively smaller as the inclined killing chute is approached. The chute opens into the killing pen through a swing gate. The floor of the killing pen is in the form of a trap door held level by triggers which engage the killing door. The killing door separates the pen from the hang rail and blood trough leading into the slaughterhouse. The trap door is counter-

balanced and drops to open, rising automatically to close.

When the reindeer enters the killing pen one man grasps the antlers and pulls the head forward. A knife is inserted quickly through the atlas joint between the skull and neck-bone, severing the spinal column. The animal drops as from a paralytic stroke and offers little if any resistance. The reindeer is then immediately shackled, bled, and from this time until the processing is completed the carcass is handled very similar to beef kills in any modern plant.

Some of the thinner animals are boned out and the meat is sold as reindeer-burger, but most of it is sold in frozen carcass form.

Steer carcasses would average probably 185 pounds or more in November but because of limited transportation and other handicaps we cannot kill that late and very little of our Nunivak kill is in prime condition.

The meat is very palatable, possibly resembling lamb. The past season was the first one in which any market packaged the product and presented it according to modern standards in refrigerated cases with other meats.

DEMAND GROWS

One retailer in Anchorage, Alaska, has requested 100,000 pounds for next season. Small amounts of carcass meat were sent to various points in the United States, including a shipment to Hawaii. By-products are used mostly in northwest Alaska, though one food specialty merchant in California uses from 1,000 to 2,000 pounds of reindeer liver each season.

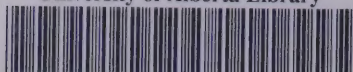
There are no tranquilizers, hormones, or commercial antibiotics used in the reindeer's diet and the reindeer in Alaska are practically free from disease. Veterinary inspection is made of the kill and plant each season.

We face many problems with which processors in the south would be wholly unfamiliar. However, grazing, taxes, and labor are not major ones.

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

When Alaska obtains roads and transportation that is competitive there will be a possible potential for reindeer products. The land that can support reindeer is not limited. As now operated in Alaska the reindeer business is not an industry but a supplemental income for several hundred native families.

There are only approximately 43,000 reindeer in Alaska, excluding those on the Alaskan Chain now classified as caribou, and according to law, only natives can own reindeer in Alaska.



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